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ABSTRACT

Research shows that people comply more frequently to threats when the credibility of the source is high rather than low and that compliance is directly related to punishment magnitude. To examine the impact of an advisor on a target of threats, male college students (N=74) participated in an experiment that included high or low threatner credibility, high or low punishment magnitude, and high or low advisor credibility. Targets of threats were provided with an advisor, who was alleged to have special information about the threatener. The threatener was either 50% or 0% credible in backing up his demands by punishing noncompliance, and the punishment magnitude was either high or low. The advisor forecasted punishments accurately or inaccurately, with 80% or 20% credibility. Results showed that although early in the interaction both the threatener's and advisor's credibilities affected compliance, overall the subjects' responses became so dependent on the advisor's predictions that threat credibility did not affect compliance rates. (PAS)

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ADVISOR CREDIBILITY AND REACTIONS TO THREATS

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982.

Summary

Tedeschi, Schlenker, and Bonoma (1973) reviewed research showing that subjects complied more frequently to threats when the source's credibility was high rather than low and that compliance was directly related to punishment magnitude. Given that it would not be in the target's interest to comply to a threat if punishment would not be administered by the threatener, accurate predictions by an advisor would allow subjects to minimize their losses through noncompliance at opportune times. Thus, it might be generally expected that subjects would be less compliant when the credibility of an acvisor is high rather than low. The warnings of the advisor may be more valuable when the punishment threatened is high, although this speculation could not lead to any a priori predictions. To examine the impact of an advisor on a target of threats an experiment was carried out that included high or low threatener credibility, high or low punishment magnitude, and high or low advisor credibility.

Method

Subjects. Seventy-four male college students were randomly

assigned to the eight experimental conditions.

Apparatus. Subjects were seated in front of fully automated equipment to monitor and program events in a mixed motive game. It contained: (a) a green "Go" light which signaled that the subject should push either of two buttons, where choice 1 represented a cooperate (or compliant) response and choice 2 represented a competitive (or noncompliant) response; (b) a 2 × 2 payoff matrix indicating that if both persons made Choice 1 selections both would win four points and if both made Choice 2 selctions both would lose four points; however, if one person made Choice 1 and the other Choice 2 then the former would lose five points and the latter would gain five points. The appropriate cell of the matrix would be illuminated following each trial to indicate to the players which selections had been made on that iteration of the game; (c) automatic add-subtract counters which displayed both the subject's and the opponent's point totals at all times during their interaction; (d) two columns of cafeteria style brackets in which printed messages could be inserted; one column was identified as the "Other player's messages" and the second column was identified as the "advisor's messages." Next to each message was a light which was illuminated to indicate message transmission. A large white light was lit to inform subjects when the communications channels were open and messages could be received. The subjects could not send messages.

Procedure. By drawing straws two subjects and a confederate were assigned roles. The confederate was given the role of

message sender. Each subject was assigned the role of message receiver but led to believe the other was an advisor. Each was placed in a cubicle in front of a game panel, given instructions relating strategy choices to payoffs, and informed that the other player could send the message "If you do not make Choice 1 on the next trial, I will take 5 (20) points from your counter" whenever the white communications light was illuminated. If subjects did not make choice 1 following the threat, the message sender could administer the punishment by pushing a button and deducting the specified number of points from the subject's counter.

Another set of instructions explained that the advisor could send either of two messages whenever the other player sent one: (A1) "He will use the penalty option" or (A2) "He will not use the penalty option." The advisor's decision about which message to send was allegedly based on the use of a manual to aid interpretation of a test taken earlier by the message sender.

A total of 150 trials of the game were then played with two message trials interpolated in each block of ten trials until a criterion of ten unsuccessful threats was established, after which all message transmission was discontined. The threatener punished noncompliance 50 or 0 percent of the time and always made choice 2 on the message-relevant trial. On nonmessage trials the threatener followed a preplanned strategy, making choices 1 and 2 equally often. The advisor was accurate in predicting punishments on norcompliance trials either 80 or 20 percent of the

time.

Results

Manipulation Checks. A main effect of threatener credibility was obtained on subjects' ratings of how often they were punished for noncompliance ($p < .001$). Subjects perceivec the threatener as backing up his threats more often in the 50 percent (M=4.79) than in the 0 percent condition (M=1.71). On another 7 point scale subjects were asked to rate how accurate the advisor was and only a main effect of advisor credibility was found on this measure ($p < .002$). When the advisor had been 80 percent credible subjects rated him as more accurate (M=4.29) then when he had been 20 percent credible (M=2.87).

Compliance to Threats. Only effects of threat magnitude and advisor credibility were found on the overall measure of compliance ($p's < .05$). Subjects who were targets of 20 point threats were more compliant (M=20.38) than were subjects who received 5 point threats (M=17.85). Subjects were more compliant when the advisor was 20 percent credible (M=20.05) than when he was 80 percent credible (M=17.92).

In order to examine earlier effects of the independent variables analyses were performed on the rate of compliance half-way through the game interaction. Again, a threat magnitude main effect reflected that targets of 20 point threats were more compliant (M=10.41) than those receiving 5 point threats (M=9.05). A significant threatener credibility x advisor credibility interaction was also found on this measure (p

< .02). Subjects who encountered a 50 percent crecible threatener and a 20 percert credible advisor were most compliant midway in their interaction (M=14.15) and those who received threats from a 0 percent credible source and an 80 percent credible advisor were least compliant (M=8.67). Intermediate levels of compliance were tendered by subjects in the 50 percent credible threatener/80 percent credible advisor (M=9.67) and 0 percent credible threaterer/20 percent credible advisor (M=11.27) conditions. Subjects in the latter condition complied more than those in the 0 percent credible threatener/80 percent credible advisor condition ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The present results suggest that a person may become so reliant upon the information provided by a highly credible advisor that s/he tends to ignore other available information. Halfway through the interaction compliance by subjects was affected by all irdependent variables. As expectec, subjects were more compliant when the punishment threatened was high rather than low. When the advisor's credibility ws low, subjects complied more frequently to the demands of the threatener, but more often when the threaterer's credibility was high rather than low. On the other hand, when the advisor's credibility was high subjects tended tc resist the threatener's demands, but were more noncompliant wher the threats were more credible. These early interactive effects of threatener and advisor crecibilities were completely eliminated later on so that overall compliance

was directly related to punishment magnitude and inversely related to advisor credibility.

It seems clear from the manipulation checks that subjects perceived that the more credible threatener administered punishments more often than the less credible threatener. They also perceived the 80 percent credible advisor's communications as more accurate thar those of the 20 percent crecible advisor. Yet, the overall results obtained with respect to behavioral compliance indicated that subjects did not combine the probabilities associated with threatener's and advisor's credibilities prirr to making a decision regarding whether or not to comply with the threatener's demands. Instead, when the adviscr's communications were rather accurate and reliable subjects used the information as indicated by their decreased frequency of compliance in the 80 percent credible advisor conditions.

Subjects in the 20 percent credible advisor conditions could have learned that 80 percent of the time the threatener did exactly the opposite of what the advisor said he would do. This would have been just as effective a basis for deciding on whether or not to comply to the threatener's demancs as to rely on the communications of an advisor whose predictions were right 80 percent of the time. Despite the useability of the less credible advisor's communications subjects simply responded by complying more frequently to the threatener's demands and were apparently so demoralized by the inability of the advisor to make accurate predictions that they ignored the threatener's

credibility in making their decisions to comply. Thus, even when the threatener's credibility was so low that he never punished noncompliance subjects were very compliant if the advisor's predictions were only 20 percent accurate. The net effect was that when the advisor was accurate in his predictions it encouraged subjects to take advantage of the situation in order to comply when they believed that punishment would follow noncompliance and to defy the threatener when the advisor predicted he would not punish them. In this way subjects could minimize their losses in an interaction where they suffered a power disadvantage. When subjects could not rely upon the advisor because of his inaccurate predictions they appeared to take what appeared the safest course and gave in to the threatener's demands even when the latter never punished noncompliance.

References

Tedeschi, J.T., Schlenker, B.R., & Bonoma, T.V. Conflict, power, and games: The experimental study of interpersonal relations. Chicago: Aldine, 1973.